



OFFICE *of* COLORADO'S
**CHILD PROTECTION
OMBUDSMAN**



ANNUAL REPORT
FISCAL YEAR 2022-23

LISTEN

INVESTIGATE

RESOLVE

IDENTIFY TRENDS

LASTING CHANGE

LETTER FROM THE OMBUDSMAN

Dear friends and community partners,

I am honored to present the Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman's Fiscal Year 2022-23 Annual Report. The Colorado General Assembly created the CPO to provide a unique service to the citizens of Colorado. Unlike any other agency in the state, the CPO is specifically designed to serve as an impartial, free and creative resource for the children, families and professionals involved with the child protection system. Our charge is broad. In addition to helping citizens one-on-one address their concerns and questions, this agency is also tasked with studying and improving systemic issues impacting children and families in Colorado. While this agency has only existed in its current form for seven years, the demand for our services continues to grow and our impact continues to reach new depths.

The CPO transitioned into an independent state agency only seven years ago. Since that transition, we have grown from three employees to 11 full-time employees, two contract positions and multiple program areas. This growth has been necessary to meet the steady increase in the number of cases coming into the CPO, as well as the increasing systemic projects and programs brought to the CPO. In fact, the CPO had its fourth consecutive record-setting year. During the past fiscal year, the CPO opened an unprecedented 1,119 cases – a 14 percent increase from the previous year and 94 percent increase from the agency's first fiscal year as an independent agency.

During this fiscal year, in addition to continuing the agency's focus on customer service, we have continued to prioritize our outreach to youth in Colorado. The CPO was contacted by youth a record 72 times during FY 2022-23. Additionally, we have obtained funding and assistance to expand our direct youth outreach efforts and we will continue to work with youth directly and community partners to ensure youth in Colorado who need our services are easily able to access them. We have also continued to expand and refine our work to address questions and concerns regarding systems that closely interact with the child welfare system, including behavioral health services, residential services, early childhood services and others. Much of this work is highlighted in this report.

Our ability to dig into more than 1,000 cases a year gives us a lens into the child protection system that no other state agency has. Through this lens, we are able to identify issues impacting how services are delivered. Through our position in state government, we are able to take innovative and inclusive approaches to addressing such concerns. The CPO's Policy Collaborative for Children & Families has continued to serve as a unique space in Colorado to address long-standing issues. This year we were proud to house the Mandatory Reporting Task Force (established through House Bill 22-1240) and the Timonhy Montoya Task Force to Prevent Youth from Running from Out-of-Home Placements (established through House Bill 22-1375). These multidisciplinary task forces are each composed of dozens of stakeholders and will address a collective 28 directives—each with the potential to reform and/or improve practices that have existed for decades. These two task forces are emblematic of our dedication to fostering inclusive and smart conversations regarding child protection in Colorado.

The CPO's success is due to the efforts and ingenuity of a strong and diverse team, and the continued support and guidance of the CPO Advisory Board. As we reflect on the past fiscal year—and look forward to the work ahead—we know there is much to be done. However, we are confident that we will continue to refine our skills and expand our reach so that every citizen who contacts this agency receives thorough and thoughtful services.

Sincerely,

STEPHANIE VILLAFUERTE

Stephanie Villafuerte

Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman



CONTINUED GROWTH

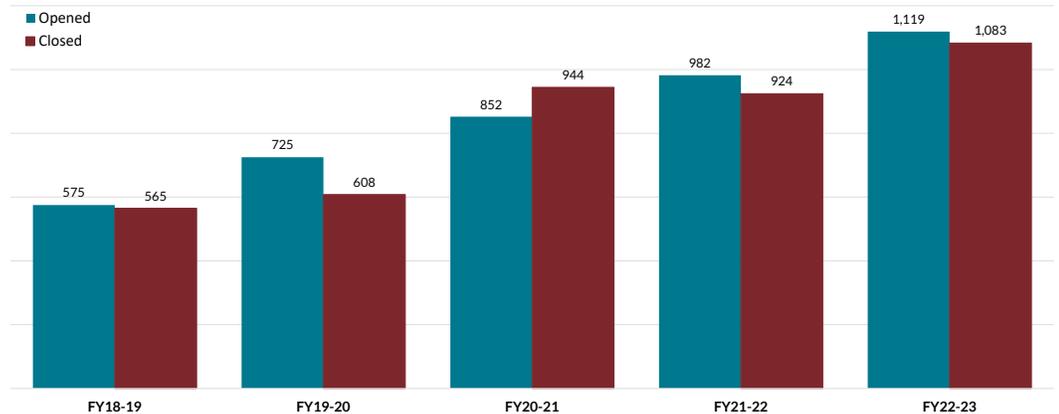
CPO CASES IN FY 2022-2023

Opening a record number of cases for the fourth consecutive year, our agency received 1,119 contacts from people seeking help during Fiscal Year 2022-23. This 14 percent annual increase not only reflects the growing role of the Office of the Colorado Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) in supporting youth, families and communities but demonstrates the benefits of our unprecedented outreach efforts and public policy initiatives. We also closed a record 1,083 cases during the fiscal year, marking a 17 percent increase compared to the previous fiscal year. Of the cases closed by our agency, two-thirds were opened by caregivers—94 percent of which were birth parents, relatives or siblings to the children involved in the case. The largest area of growth in case closures was among those initiated by youth. Our agency closed a total of 68 cases from youth which was a 74 percent jump from the previous fiscal year.

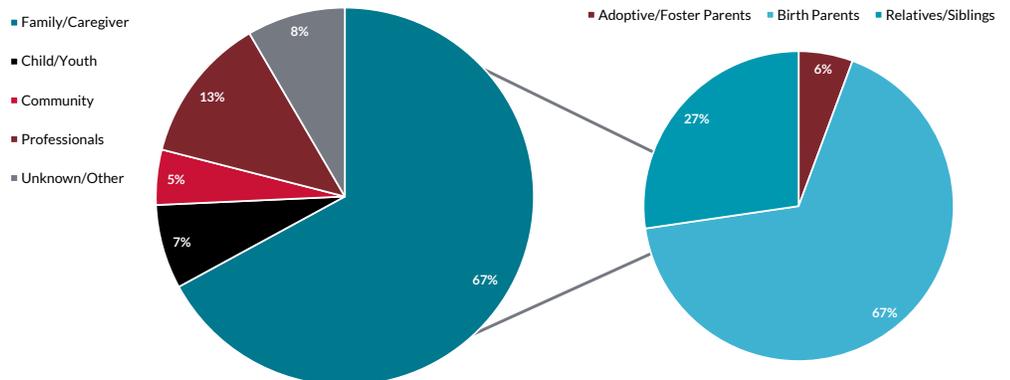
Of the cases closed by our agency in FY 2022-23, 30 percent involved concerns regarding how child welfare services handled reports of abuse and neglect. Access to services and personnel issues were the second and third-highest concerns—appearing in 21 and 19 percent of cases, respectively. Additionally, the CPO continued working with the Devereux Colorado Unaccompanied Children’s Service Program, to review the care provided to unaccompanied immigrant children placed in licensed facilities in Colorado. However, on March 16, 2023, the CPO was notified that Devereux was ending this program, citing concerns recruiting and retaining bilingual staff. The program discharged all clients by the end of March 2023.

CPO CASE HISTORY	TOTAL # OF CASES
Fiscal Year 2022-23	1,119
Fiscal Year 2021-22	982
Fiscal Year 2020-21	852
Fiscal Year 2019-20	725
Fiscal Year 2018-19	575
Fiscal Year 2017-18	611
Fiscal Year 2016-17	577

CASES BY FISCAL YEAR



RELATIONSHIP TO CHILD



CASE HIGHLIGHTS



Case #1

The CPO was contacted by a youth who was residing in foster care. The youth shared concerns that her 17-year-old foster sister was not allowed to drive herself or her five siblings around due to Colorado's young driver laws. The youth explained that drivers under 18 in Colorado cannot drive with more than one passenger in the car unless the passengers are members of the driver's immediate family. The youth was told that, as a youth in foster care, she didn't count as part of the immediate family, which made her feel excluded from the family. The CPO researched the law and spoke with a representative from the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT). CDOT clarified that foster siblings are considered immediate family. The CPO shared this information with the youth and made sure to clarify that if her foster parents had certain rules regarding who she may drive in the car with, those need to be followed. The youth was happy to hear that CDOT included youth in foster care in the definition of family and the youth said that she was thankful for the CPO's help. The youth's foster mother reported that they were excited to learn this information and the youth's experience advocating for herself was positive. The CPO also provided contact information for Project Foster Power if the youth would like to explore other advocacy opportunities.

Case #2



A citizen contacted the CPO with concerns that a county department of human services did not properly notify the judge overseeing the child's court case. The citizen was concerned the judge was not providing important child safety and parent information throughout the child welfare case. This included information about the circumstances in the foster home where the child was living. Without this information, the citizen alleged, the judge was not able to make informed decisions regarding the child's care. The CPO reviewed relevant documentation and identified concerns regarding the level of detail provided in court reports. The reports did not contain information about new referrals of abuse or neglect. The CPO also identified that the county department did not address safety concerns with the foster home and had additional questions as to why the foster home's certification history was irregular. The CPO facilitated a meeting with the county department who affirmed the CPO's concerns. Regarding the lack of information on about new referrals in the foster home, the agency stated it had received guidance from their legal counsel that sharing information could breach the confidentiality of the foster care providers. The county department also shared that they agreed that they did not address safety concerns in the foster home timely. They reported that this was because they believed it was the responsibility of a neighboring county department, because this is where the family lived.



CASE HIGHLIGHTS



Case #3

During December 2022, the CPO was contacted by a young adult who had been placed in a residential child care facility (RCCF) and group home as a youth. The young adult stated they needed a letter to verify they had been in foster care to obtain education benefits. The young adult said that the county department involved in her case, told her it would take up to 30 days to get the letter. Unfortunately, the young adult was running up against a deadline to submit her materials. The CPO contacted the county department, who responded immediately and stated that they were unable to locate the documentation showing the young adult was ever in foster care. The CPO facilitated communication between the young adult and the county department, and it was determined that although they were placed in an RCCF and later a group home, they were never in the county department's custody. The county department did complete child welfare assessments regarding the young adult and their family, and there was a juvenile delinquency case through the courts, but there was neither an ongoing child welfare case nor a dependency and neglect case. It appeared that the young adult had been placed through Medicaid or private pay. The CPO explained this information to the young adult, and the county department said they would also call them the same day. Although the county department was not able to provide the requested documentation, they were quick to refer the young adult to a community resource that provides support to individuals who have previous experience with juvenile delinquency courts.



Case #4

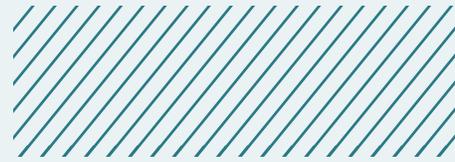
A grandmother caring for her grandchildren contacted the CPO with concerns that the county department handling her grandchildren's child welfare case, was not providing her with financial reimbursements needed to help care for the children. The grandmother explained that when the child welfare case was opened and the children were placed with her, the county department agreed to help fund child care expenses. However, the grandmother stated that her efforts during the past several months to obtain the reimbursements were unsuccessful. The CPO contacted the county department to learn about the agreement and the steps they'd taken to provide financial assistance. The county department was initially unable to confirm that they had agreed to provide such reimbursements. However, after several requests from the CPO, the agency agreed to meet with the employee who originally worked with the grandmother. That employee confirmed that an agreement was made with the grandmother to provide her with reimbursement for child care costs. The CPO continued to monitor the case and was able to confirm the assistance was provided. In total, the county department provided the grandmother with approximately \$5,300, which allowed the grandmother to catch up on past-due bills and ensure that the children had their needs met. The grandmother shared with the CPO, "I know this would never have happened if it not for your intervention. I am truly grateful for all of your assistance."



...I am truly grateful for all of your assistance.



FISCAL YEAR HIGHLIGHTS



Launch of Timothy Montoya Task Force

During the 2022 legislative session, the Colorado General Assembly created the Timothy Montoya Task Force to Prevent Youth from Running from Out-of-Home Placement with House Bill 22-1375. In September 2022, the Policy Collaborative for Children & Families launched the task force to study why youth run from care and develop a consistent, prompt and effective response. Meeting seven times during FY 2022-23, the diverse 22-member group discussed the lived experiences of youth and professionals, system responses, runaway behaviors and predictors. Members have also worked to address the insufficiency of quantitative data statewide, agency and facility protocols, practices in other states and the potential for a statewide response guide. The task force also commissioned focus groups through the University of Denver's Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab to provide first-hand perspectives from providers and youth in facilities. The task force's first-year report will be published and submitted to the Governor and General Assembly on October 1, 2023.



Launch of Mandatory Reporting Task Force

With the passage of House Bill 22-1240 during the 2022 legislative session, the Colorado General Assembly formed the Mandatory Reporting Task Force. The task force is charged with addressing 19 directives to consider the efficacy and equity of the state's mandatory child abuse reporting law and its impact on children, families and professionals across the state. The 34-member task force was launched by the Policy Collaborative for Children & Families in December 2022 and met four times during FY 2022-23. Topics discussed thus far by the group include concerns around mandatory reporting, the law's effectiveness, intentions of reporters, family services, the impact of race and ethnicity, lived experiences of youth and families, and data collected during reporting. The task force's first-year report will be published and submitted to the Governor and General Assembly on January 1, 2024.



Addressing Practice Concerns

Recognizing patterns in the experiences and concerns of individuals contacting our agency, we brought multiple practice concerns to the attention of state child protection agencies. For example, in June 2023, we delivered a letter to the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) after the CPO was contacted by a client with concerns that the agency did not comply with state laws requiring public notice of unlicensed child care facilities providing improper child care. The CPO alerted CDEC of its concerns after the CPO's review found that the agency may not have provided all required information on the Colorado Shines website. The CDEC responded immediately and addressed the CPO's concerns. Another letter was sent in June 2023 to the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) that detailed concerns with the practices and potential systemic bias by the Washington County Department of Human Services (WCDHS) in handling child welfare cases. Multiple cases opened by the CPO concerned clients who allege their cases were negatively impacted by the actions of WCDHS. These concerns include allegations that the former director made derogatory statements about clients. The CPO has requested that CDHS conduct an audit of the cases under the supervision of the WCDHS' former director and a review of notifications provided, if any, to families impacted by the actions of WCDHS. The CPO is continuing to monitor this case and the CDHS' response.



Identifying Systemic Issues

Appearing before members of the Colorado General Assembly in June 2023, our agency brought four systemic issues facing youth and families to the attention of the Child Welfare System Interim Study Committee. The CPO outlined four primary areas of concern: (1) Insufficient monthly contacts from county agencies with the parents involved in their child welfare cases; (2) The absence of statewide ethical standards for caseworkers and any law or regulation to take adverse action against an individual who acts unethically or unlawfully; (3) The current safety tool used to assess the immediate safety of children produces inconsistent results; and (4) Colorado's lack of law or regulation to ensure consistent and transparent standards regarding the quality of care provided to children and youth residing in residential treatment facilities. A series of recommendations for each issue was also provided as potential paths forward for the committee to consider.

Connecting with the Community

Our agency's expanded outreach capacity, resources and strategy have opened up new opportunities for engaging youth, families, populations overrepresented in child protection systems, rural communities, professionals and stakeholders across Colorado and beyond.



Youth Outreach

Utilizing the youth focus groups and surveys facilitated by the CPO during FY 2021-22, our agency took unprecedented steps towards making youth with experience in Colorado's child protection systems a central component of our work. We designed new outreach campaigns based on the feedback the survey provided on existing agency materials. These concepts were then used in our first digital marketing campaign with youth-related promotions reaching Colorado individuals Googling words and phrases similar to what a youth seeking our services would search for.

After securing funding for FY 2022-23, we began laying the foundation for the Tori Shuler Youth Voice Program (YVP) which will directly engage Colorado youth through focus groups, policy initiatives and special projects. Involving youth voice from the start of a policy initiative is a key priority for the CPO. To continue developing the YVP, we met with Tori Shuler at Fostering Great Ideas, youth on the Lived Experts Action Panel (LEAP) operated by the Office of the Colorado Child's Representative and AmeriCorps' VISTA program. We will continue to develop this program throughout FY 2023-24.



Targeting Communications and Increasing Accessibility

The CPO serves diverse clients with unique concerns and circumstances. In recognizing this diversity, and after auditing the agency's communication practices and materials, our agency developed a new outreach strategy to connect with youth, caregivers, professionals and communities with messaging, mediums and information specific to these diverse groups. This included our 11-day digital marketing campaign that reached youth, caregivers and professionals in every region of the state. To increase inclusion in our outreach materials, we commissioned the design of new family icons reflecting youth and families of different races, ethnicities, genders, sexualities and cultures. We also began to improve the accessibility of both our print and digital marketing assets by reducing the complexity of text to recommended grade levels and developing a new website that is compliant with current accessibility standards such as color contrast.



National Presence

The CPO is widely recognized by ombudsman offices and child protection stakeholders across the United States as an innovative leader in this work. During FY 2022-23, we were invited to participate in critical conversations—nationally and globally—as well as provide consultation to other states seeking to use our agency as a model. Ombudsman Stephanie Villafuerte conducted presentations at the Kempe Center's International Virtual Conference, Global Oneness Summit and the United States Ombudsman Association Conference. Deputy Ombudsman Jordan Steffen also presented to the West Virginia Foster Care Ombudsman Office, New Mexico General Assembly and other states working to establish children and family ombuds offices. Additionally, Director of Client Services Amanda Pennington provided insight on our agency's work at the American Bar Association / Kids in Need of Defense Unaccompanied Immigrant Children's Service Provider Training.



ADVISORY BOARD

The CPO Advisory Board is an independent, nonpartisan board of 12 members. Four members are appointed from each branch of government and all members serve for a period of four years. Each position on the Board requires a certain set of experience or expertise. The Board was established to provide a mechanism of oversight for the Child Protection Ombudsman, however, its role is much broader. The CPO team routinely relies on the expertise of its Board to expand and guide its work. Members have decades of experience and include child welfare professionals, judges, doctors, attorneys, county commissioners, human service directors, foster parents and advocates.

ABOUT

OUR MISSION

We ensure Colorado child protection systems consistently, fairly and equitably deliver services to every child, youth and family across our state.

CASE SUPPORT

- Guide youth, families and community members in navigating complex systems
- Review cases to ensure the highest attainable standards of care
- Work with people and agencies to resolve concerns and disputes at the ground level

SYSTEMS CHANGE

- Engage communities across Colorado in addressing local and statewide problems
- Collaborate with stakeholders and lawmakers to improve services, policies and laws

CPO STAFF

Stephanie Villafuerte, *Child Protection Ombudsman*

Jordan Steffen, *Deputy Ombudsman*

Karen Nielsen, *Director of Administrative Services*

Amanda Pennington, *Director of Client Services*

Michael W. Teague, *Director of Public Affairs*

Claire Hooker, *Senior Client Services Analyst*

Brittany Cornelius, *Client Services Analyst*

Abbey Koch, *Client Services Analyst*

Tiffany Lewis, *Client Services Analyst*

Wendy Oldenbrook, *Client Services Analyst*

Meredith Sullivan, *Client Services Analyst*

CPO BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Ann Roan, *Board Chair*

Benjamin Rounsborg

Hon. Amanda Hopkins

Hon. Kenneth Plotz

Governor Appointments

Judith Martinez, *Vice Chair*

April Lane

Aaron Miltenberger

Jerene Petersen

Senate President Appointment

Charles Tedesco

Senate Minority Appointment

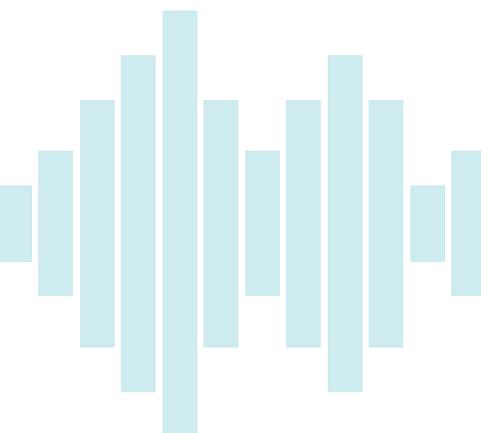
Wendy Buxton-Andrade

Speaker of the House Appointment

Dr. Coral Steffey

House Minority Leader Appointment

Brian Bernhard





CONTACT INFORMATION



1300 Broadway, Suite 430, Denver, CO 80203



720-625-8640



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